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SOL MARKS

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IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE
VERIFICATION CLERK AND INSPECTOR AT ELLIS ISLAND
1935-1946

NASH: Today I have the pleasure of visiting with Mr. Sol Marks, District Director of the New York District of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, United States Department of Justice. Mr. Marks was formerly employed at Ellis Island and we're going to ask him just what his experience was at that Island. Mr. Marks, could you give me a job description?

MARKS: Well, I started at Ellis Island in 1935 as a clerk. I verified the arrivals of people who were seeking citizenship. I would check the old manifests of the ships on which they arrived years before that time. It was important as a prerequisite to citizenship that they be lawfully admitted for permanent residence, so I had to check the records of arrival to insure that they were. Thereafter, I was promoted to an Immigrant Inspector position and worked in the office and outside on investigations as well.

NASH: During 1935, what was the function of Ellis Island?

MARKS: Well, I think the common conception is that Ellis Island was a receiving station for all immigrants arriving from overseas. That was true originally, but at the time I was working there it was actually a detention station and the headquarters office for the Immigration Service in New York.

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The people that were detained at Ellis Island during the days I worked there were those essentially who were arrested because they were found subject to deportation and were already living here. A small handful were people who arrived from overseas and because there was some technical deficiency in either their documents or it was found that they might be inadmissible to the United States, they were detained until that could be settled. But they were a small number.

NASH: What were some of the conditions that they didn't meet that would mean that they might be returned?

MARKS: Well, the immigration law contained a host of provisions which would serve as excluding provisions so that if a person was found to be afflicted with epilepsy or tuberculosis or some loathsome or contagious disease, they would be inadmissible to the United States or if they had been found to have committed crime or they were considered to be subversives, they would be barred from admission.

NASH: How would they know if they committed crimes? Would that be in the United States, you mean, or...?

MARKS: No, these were applicants seeking admission. They were generally crimes that were committed abroad or if they were persons who had lived here and gone abroad for a visit and it was determined that they committed crimes even in this country, but prior to their last entry, they would be inadmissible.

NASH: In the second phase of your employment, could you describe what happened to the immigrant once he came into contact with you and what part of the Island was that? Where was your office located?

MARKS: Well, I didn't play any part in determining admissibility of people at

all. I was working in the investigations area at that time so my work was out in the streets of the city. I also had a number of desk jobs there reviewing various applications of people who were residing in the city.

NASH: Could you tell us a little bit about how you conducted an investigation?

MARKS: Well, generally in investigations you have an allegation that a person is illegally here. That would be one type of investigation, and you try to determine the efficacy of that allegation. So you make your inquiry, you seek out the person, and you determine what their status is. Generally a person who is illegally here doesn't have documentation to establish his lawful residence, so it is a fairly simple thing to establish.

NASH: Where were the deportation hearing held?

MARKS: Deportation hearings were held at Ellis Island, and they were not as sophisticated as they are today. Today we're using recording machines. In those days we had to have them all recorded by stenographers. The hearings were laborious, drawn-out. It took a great many days and weeks and months before a decision was rendered. Today the decision-making authority is in the immigration judge who renders a decision at the end of the hearing and furnishes the individual with a written notice of the decision. No transcript is made of the record generally unless there's an appeal, and the appeals are rare because the cases are resolved almost immediately.

NASH: Who made the ultimate decision then?

MARKS: In those days, no decision-making power was in the district office at Ellis Island. Everything was handled out of Washington. It wasn't until 1950 when they decentralized and gave authority to the districts to make decisions in

most of the cases we handle.

NASH: Did you have any contact at all with the immigrants on the Island?

MARKS: No, I don't think I was involved in that at all. We had what we called a Special Inquiry Section there and a Board of Special Inquiry, and they would have dealings with the immigrants on arrival and then there were immigrant inspectors who would go out on ships and inspect the passengers arriving from overseas. That was not my function.

NASH: How did Ellis Island change during the period that you were employed there?

MARKS: Well, while I was there they erected some new buildings at the ferry slip for the Public Health Service, and the district director took up headquarters on Ellis Island, which was rather an innovation at the time. He had fairly elaborate quarters. They weren't swank or anything, but he had a good view of the incoming ocean liners and his rent was cheap and he lived well because he had commissary privileges and I think he enjoyed it.

NASH: What was it like to work at Ellis Island?

MARKS: We enjoyed working at Ellis Island because we used to take a ferry which took about fifteen minutes from the mainland, and during that period of time you would have an opportunity to meet your friends and socialize and talk about things of common interest, and you developed the kind of camaraderie that we don't have today in these tall skyscraper buildings where you meet your friends for fleeting seconds in an elevator or a hallway.

NASH: Do you think there are any artifacts of immigrants, any things they dropped around the Island, off the Island in the water? What is your opinion about that?

MARKS: They're probably gone by now. I regret though that none of us had an eye to history when working at Ellis Island. If we had, we might have preserved a great many things that were available at the time, and even merely photographing things would have been a great idea, but unfortunately, we didn't have the wisdom or the foresightedness to do that.

NASH: I noticed some photographs in the waiting room downstairs. Are they from the Sherman Collection? The Sherman Collection consists of photographs taken by, was he the superintendent of the, do you know who I mean, Sherman?

MARKS: No, I do not.

NASH: Well, at the museum now, we have something called the Sherman Collection of photographs which was taken maybe by an inspector just on his own over the years and it is a most amazing collection of different costumes and they just look exactly like those photos.

MARKS: Well, we had an inspector named Sam Sherman, but I doubt whether that was the man. This must have preceded Sam Sherman, because they looked as though they were photographs taken at the turn of the century.

NASH: Did you wear a uniform?

MARKS: For a short while I wore a uniform. It was an olive green thing. But the inspectors who boarded ships always wore uniforms with a cap and an overcoat in the wintertimes, and it's now changed to a blue uniform.

NASH: Do you think there is anything you might like to add about your experience there, any area that maybe not too much is known about?

MARKS: Well, I think I might mention that during World War II, Ellis Island was used as a kind of a detention area for alien enemies, namely the Germans and Italians who were deemed to be enemies of our country and who could conceivably resort to some sabotage or subversive activities, and they were detained at Ellis Island while their cases were being heard by Alien Enemy Hearing Boards, and if it was deemed that they must be interned for the duration of the war, they were transferred from Ellis Island to detention camps out West.

NASH: Were these people residing in the United States or people entering?

MARKS: Most of these people were residents of the United States and because the FBI or other agencies had information indicating that they were enemies of the United States and might be prone to sabotage this country, it was felt that they should be interned. There were also members of alien enemy ships who were in port at the time the war broke out and who were subsequently interned who also were detained at Ellis Island for a while until their final internment in camps out West.

NASH: What would be the longest period of detainment?

MARKS: Might have been several months in some of these cases, and a good number of these cases, the people were ultimately released from Ellis Island and not interned, but they had to wait until protracted investigations were conducted as to their loyalty.

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NASH: What sort of conditions did they live under?

MARKS: I think the conditions were fairly good. Certainly the food was good, and they were barracks-type conditions, and they appointed their own leaders and maintained living conditions, I think, that were highly respectable and we didn't have to be ashamed of it at all.

NASH: Did members of any organizations from the city, any kinds of religious or social work organizations ever have any contact with these detainees?

MARKS: I couldn't say because I wasn't really very close to it. I am just giving you my own superficial observations of it. I was not involved in the actual detention or operation at all.

NASH: When did your connection with Ellis Island end and how?

MARKS: I left to go to Washington in about 1946. The Island closed in 1954. So I would say that I was there from 1935 to 1946.

NASH: Many people have wondered when it did close, it looks as if people just evacuated. There was no kind of organized putting away of things. What do you think about that?

MARKS: Well, I was in a rather lowly position at the time. Didn't have any part in the management of the organization, so I am really not too well versed in that aspect of it. I don't think you can regard me as an authority of the evacuation of the Island. (Ms. Nash laughs)

NASH: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Marks.

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MARKS: You are welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW